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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000601

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL IZ FR

SUBJECT: FRANCE WELCOMES IRAQI ELECTIONS AS VICTORY FOR IRAQI PEOPLE, INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Senior French officials publicly welcomed Iraq's election as a victory for the Iraqi people and the international community, while voicing caution on future necessary steps in Iraq's political transition, including an eventual withdrawal of foreign troops. President Chirac told visiting Codel Smith January 31 that he was happy and not surprised by the successful elections, which marked a failure for terrorists and a victory for the U.S. Chirac also stressed the need for a greater UN role, a more broadly-based government, and a way to ensure that the new constitution did not lead to an Islamic republic. Chirac stressed GoF willingness to help Iraq by any means short of sending troops, reiterating the standing French offer to train Iraqi police outside Iraq and stressing that the Iraq debt relief compromise came at significant cost to France. Chirac's spokesman later January 31 offered greater nuance on the terrorism angle, noting that the successful elections meant that terrorists' strategy had "partly failed." End summary.

POSITIVE PUBLIC STATEMENTS

¶2. (SBU) FM Barnier welcomed the January 30 Iraqi election as a "first victory for the Iraqi people," and called the electoral process a "defeat for terrorism," during a Europe-1 radio interview early January 31. Barnier cited further necessary steps in Iraq's "fragile" political process, such as the drafting of the constitution, which should provide for "equitable representation of all communities in Iraq," elections for a permanent government, and the withdrawal of foreign troops, without citing a precise date for the latter. French government spokesman Jean-Francois Cope, in a preliminary reaction January 30, described the Iraqi elections as a "great victory" for the international community and said the turnout rate, if confirmed, was good news. The MFA Iraq desk stressed to us January 31 that the GoF reaction to the elections was intended to be very positive, and that election day violence had been less than the GoF expected. French press reaction (ref a) to the elections has been grudgingly positive, commending the courage of the Iraqi people and the higher than expected participation amid continued violence, while pointing out the difficulties that remain ahead.

CHIRAC COMMENDS OUTCOME, CITES CHALLENGES AHEAD

¶3. (C) During a January 31 meeting with Codel Smith (septel), President Chirac stressed his happiness with the well-organized and successful election, which he did not find surprising. The elections marked a failure for terrorist groups and a victory for the U.S.; Chirac said he would tell President Bush the same thing by phone later that day. The elections were an encouraging sign for the future, though not all problems were solved and difficulties remained ahead. Chirac said the elections had accelerated Iraq's integration into the international democratic community, and called for giving the UN a greater role in the political transition, opening the political process to all groups who reject violence, and seeing to it that the drafting of the constitution does not lead to establishment of an Islamic republic. On the latter point, Chirac referred to a January 31 statement by Ayatollah Sistani (NFI) which he found "worrying." Chirac also cautioned that the drafters of Iraq's constitution would have to ensure that all non-violent groups were included and that Iraq's unity remained intact. The Kurds, he added, were seeking autonomy, something which would create problems for Turkey.

¶4. (C) Chirac also affirmed to Codel Smith GoF willingness to contribute to Iraq's reconstruction and stability, asserting that France had refused only to send troops to Iraq -- it remained ready to contribute in other ways. He cited the French decision, at U.S. request, to cancel "almost all" of Iraq's debt, which he said cost the GoF some 4.5 billion euros. The GoF had told PM Allawi nine months earlier (July 2004) of its willingness to train Iraqi gendarmes, with no response despite repeated reminders. Chirac said he repeated the training offer to IIG President Yawer earlier in January in the form of a written proposal, clarifying that the GOF

would be willing to train some 1,500 Iraqi gendarmes over an 18-period in France or Qatar.

15. (U) President Chirac's spokesman Jerome Bonnafont, commenting January 31 on Chirac's meeting with Codel Smith and phone call earlier that day with President Bush, appeared to offer more nuance on the terrorism issue and slightly less enthusiastic language. Bonnafont described participation and technical organization of the elections as "satisfactory," and added that, according to Chirac, "the strategy of terrorist groups has partly failed."

16. (C) Comment: The positive French reaction to the Iraqi election, combined with new momentum from the GoF in implementing its long-standing police training offer, point to a shift from France's "wait and see" attitude towards more concrete support for Iraq's new government. The main potential problem we see in the French approach is the degree to which the GoF continues to call for a year-end withdrawal date for foreign troops as the final step of the political process outlined in UNSCR 1546; it will be important to keep emphasizing to the GoF that building Iraq's security capacity, not setting artificial deadlines, will make it possible for Iraq to take full responsibility for its own security. End comment.

17. (U) This cable was not cleared by Codel Smith. Baghdad minimize considered.
Leach